

Message Text

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FOR EUR/SOV: USIA FOR IB, IPS, IEV

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TAGS: PFOR, OTRA, US, UR

SUBJECT: STENBRIDGE GROUP AT BAPTIST SERVICES

REF: MOSCOW 17919, STATE 294693 AND PREVIOUS

1. BEGIN SUMMARY: TOURIST GROUP LED BY MR. JOHN STENBRIDGE DECEMBER 23 ATTENDED SERVICES AT THE UNION OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS-BAPTISTS CHURCH IN MOSCOW. THE MEETING WAS A TRADITIONAL BAPTIST SERVICE OF SONG, PRAYER, AND SERMON, AND ALL CONCERNED AVOIDED PROVOKING ANY INCIDENTS. END SUMMARY

2. SEVERAL MEMBERS OF THE AMERICAN GROUP PARTICIPATED IN THE SERVICES, APPARENTLY AT THE INVITATION OF THE RUSSIAN BAPTISTS. STENBRIDGE DELIVERED A SHORT BUT EMOTIONAL MESSAGE WHICH RECALLED HIS FIRST VISIT TO THE CHURCH IN 1962 AND EMPHASIZED THE UNITY OF ALL MANKIND IN GOD'S LOVE. A QUARTET FROM THE STENBRIDGE GROUP SANG A TRADITIONAL BAPTIST HYMN, AND A SOLIST FROM THE GROUP LATER SANG WITH THE AID OF A MICROPHONE AND SOUND SYSTEM FURNISHED BY THE RUSSIAN BAPTISTS. THE PROTESTANT CHAPLAIN IN MOSCOW, REVEREND MICHAEL SPANGLER, ALSO DELIVERED A SERMON WHICH WAS FOLLOWED BY A LONGER SERMON

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GIVEN BY A RUSSIAN BAPTIST.

3. THE CHURCH WAS CROWDED WITH PEOPLE OF ALL AGES, WITH THE VISITING AMERICANS SEATED AMONG THE RUSSIAN BAPTISTS IN THE BALCONY AND CHOIR LOFT. THE SERVICES ENDED WITH AN EXCHANGE OF CHRISTMAS GREETINGS AND SINGING OF "SILENT NIGHT."

4. ALTHOUGH MEMBERS OF THE STENBRIDGE GROUP ACTIVELY PARTICIPATED IN THE SERVICE, THEY APPEARED CONTENT TO EXPRESS TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS THEMES, AVOIDING OVERTLY POLITICAL ANTI-SOVIET STATEMENTS. REPORTING OFFICER SAW NO EFFORTS BY SOVIET AUTHORITIES TO INTERFERE WITH THE SERVICE OR PREVENT PARTICIPATION BY AMERICANS. IN FACT, THE SERVICE APPEARED TO FOLLOW A PREARRANGED PATTERN, WHICH HAD PROBABLY BEEN MUTUALLY WORKED OUT BY STENBRIDGE AND THE RUSSIAN BAPTISTS AND WAS POSSIBLY EVEN CHECKED BEFORE HAND WITH INTOURIST. DURING AN EARLIER TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WITH EMBOFF, STENBRIDGE INDICATED THAT HIS GROUP PLANS TO ATTEND SIMILAR SERVICES IN LENINGRAD SATURDAY NIGHT, AND IT SEEMS LIKELY THAT THEY WILL SEEK TO PARTICIPATE IN THAT SERVICE AS WELL.
STOESSEL

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